



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Interrelations of the Professions

By CHARLES HARRIS WHITAKER

Editor, the Journal of the American Institute of Architects

TO begin any discussion of the professional relation there must first be an agreement as to the meaning of professional. What is a profession? Who knows? That it is no longer what it was, we feel quite sure. Whatever group of vocations we admitted to the professional classification—if we should elect to proceed in that manner—our verdict would be that one and all of them had been tainted by that unpleasant infection commonly called “commercialism.” But this verdict instantly discovers to us two things. First, that commercialism stands generally as the antithesis of professionalism; and, second—if we have the courage to look things squarely in the face—that the epithet of commercialism, so contemptuously hurled, is no more than a quiet parry by which we prefer to condemn in another those things which we recognize, resent, and yet are unwilling to admit in ourselves. The psychologists understand this mental process very well. Governments and despots know how to capitalize it for ends of their own, and an ancient symbol likens the phenomenon to an obscuring beam in the organs of physical vision.

“COMMERCIALISM”

Now commercialism has to do with facts pecuniary. It moves and has its being wholly in the realm of measurements expressed in terms of money or a credit equivalent. When commercialism wishes to use that store of knowledge or skill which has been built up by research and which is commonly held in the keeping of the professions, it has to make terms of a pecuniary nature. These terms are either a payment in cash, or in the form of favors

bestowed or obstacles removed. No man can today practise a profession without making terms with business or commerce, or without subjecting himself to the risk of financial ruin, should his conscience lead him to proclaim a faith or a believed truth not relished by the group which believe, and no doubt with deep sincerity among some, that the laws of business are immutable and that the world must be governed by them; and that, as a consequence, all knowledge and skill, inherited or acquired, must function under the control and only in such measure and direction as will fulfill the law of loan and interest, or of investment and dividend.

From this present aspect of affairs—and not by any means does the writer assert that there are no exceptions—even such an institution as the established church is not exempt, as we may agree, at least in so far as its ministers have themselves arraigned it. Doctors beseeching a legislature to make the splitting of fees a misdemeanor, offer an example of commercial infection well recognized. The history of the Inter-Church Movement is a striking example of most of the rather loosely generalized preceding statements. But they are meant to be such, for there is here no thought of attempting to support them with recorded evidence of an unassailable kind. The answer can be found or the challenge can be accepted and dealt with by any reader who can fairly apply a simple test to himself.

THE INTER-PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCE

Something more than two years ago, a group of men and women met in one

of our large cities as a result of preceding activities by one of the recognized professions. The meeting had no object in view except to draw together a number of people who were thought to have certain sympathies and a more or less well-related attitude of mind on the subjects of professions and professionalism. There were architects, chemists, dentists, doctors, engineers, journalists, lawyers, nurses, preachers, teachers, both men and women, and, when the meeting was called to order, it is not an exaggeration to say that no one present had any idea of what the meeting would accomplish, or what form the discussion would take. It was to be, as its name implied, an Inter-Professional Conference, for discussion and counsel, for an exchange of opinion and thought, and for a possible revaluation of the professional idea or a restatement of the professional obligation. That the War had stimulated all of those present to keener searching and questioning is not to be denied, although the idea that the professional responsibilities have a common denominator is not by any means a new one.

The discussion opened by an informal statement from the presiding officer, which was followed by numerous expressions of opinion, and gradually it became evident that a profoundly similar thought was moving the majority of the minds present, a thought which bore a striking resemblance to a certain quest for freedom—that everlasting quest of small groups in all ages. It needed, apparently, no more than a sympathetic contact of mind with mind for crystallization to occur, and thus the committee, into the hands of which was given the task of translating the crystallized idea into language, found its task no more than the seeking of those words which would precisely, yet not too rigidly, define an expressed conviction.

The report of the committee was as follows:

The object of the Inter-Professional Conference is to discover how to liberate the professions from the domination of selfish interest, both within and without the professions, to devise ways and means of better utilizing the professional heritage of knowledge and skill for the benefit of society and to create relations between the professions looking toward that end.

So far as the writer remembers, the only discussion of any importance centered around the word "interest." Should it be used in the singular or the plural? Was it intended to indict selfish interest as an individual problem or as a group or collective evil? The answer is, of course, that the word remained in its singular form, which is the best evidence to be offered in support of the belief that the conferees saw themselves not as beings set apart, but as component parts of a machine from which none can be set free until all are set free.

THE DOMINATION OF SELFISH INTEREST

In other words, with perhaps one or two exceptions, the vocationalists gathered together at Detroit gave utterance to their earnest convictions, and admitted each to the other, that they could not truly practise their callings because of the domination, to a greater or lesser degree, of a thing which they called "selfish interest." And having so declared themselves, they did not fly to remedies and panaceas. Without words and without any ado, they felt instinctively that any struggle toward liberation would, by its very nature, be a challenge to the conventional order and to the whole established habit of thought. Very wisely, and very humbly, they resolved to seek to discover how to do what they felt must be done. Should they organ-

ize for the search? In the face of a tacit admission that all institutions and organizations had so far been impotent to check the swelling tide of selfish interest, it seemed strangely inconsistent to call yet another organization into existence.

One speaker made an impassioned plea against any save the merest commingling of men and women with a common purpose. "Let it be a personal crusade," said he. "Let us go away and come together in a year. Then we may report our adventures and tell our experiences, and in so doing, perhaps, we may find ourselves a step further on the way. Let us beware of organizations in a world where all organizations are no more than autocracies more or less thinly veiled, in a world where every idea that suffers institutionalization perishes in a miserable allegiance to the institution rather than to the idea; where almost every continuing group of beings becomes no more than a center of activity for selfish interest. Our problem is a personal one, and can never be solved by any organization."

Now the Inter-Professional Conference has passed into history. Its organization survived barely a few months, probably for the reason that the problem is not only personal, but spiritual, and the spirit of man has not yet successfully been organized. Yet the question raised is one of almost terrible moment. How can society become the beneficiary and not the mere gatherer of crumbs from the tables of professionalism? No better summary of the situation can be made than in the words of the speaker who said:

Our knowledge and our skill are inheritances. They have been bought and paid for by the laborious struggles of men and women down through the ages, through sweat and agony, through suffering, poverty and deprivation. They are ours by inheritance only, and we are the trustees of that

knowledge and skill. They belong to society. It is not a question of whether we should give back part of them as a charity. Our first obligation is to the society from which all derive them. Men have never sought to carry the treasures of knowledge to the grave. They have ever sought to give them to the world, and we, through our application and study, seek to acquire what they have given to mankind. But it was to all men that the knowledge was given. No chosen few that use it have the right to sell it for private gain to others who use it for private gain, unless in so doing they confer a true benefit upon society as a whole.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF PROFESSIONALISM

That is the challenge being thrown down by our industrial machine, by our unworkable cities with their centralized populations, by our acres of slums, by our declining agriculture, and by the red gauntlet that is still dripping with the blood of our brothers. We have sufficient knowledge and skill to change our environment at will, to restore the balance of industry and agriculture, to abolish the frightful waste of resources, including life, which now marks our helter-skelter method of production and distribution as we pursue them under the lash of selfish interest. Yet we are incapable of so applying that knowledge except in the scantiest degree. The engineer and the architect, for example, in serving the individual selfish interest of their clients, can give only such regard to the interest of the community as the pecuniary factors involving their client will permit. There is no one to represent and defend the public interest except to a meager degree under police regulation, a safeguard quite as honored in the breach as in the observance. That function of government, the protection of the social welfare, if it has at any time existed since the

supersession of Canonical Law by Roman Law, long ago disappeared. The forces of selfish interest are everywhere too strong, and yet—the keepers of knowledge and skill hold the key to the main gate. That is their inescapable responsibility. It is their common problem, and yet their personal problem. Whether we contemplate the desolate moral waste inflicted upon society under the guise of law and its practice, or the mass of sham and tawdry productions devised with the help of chemists and engineers, or the monstrous urban agglomerations that the scramble for land values has produced with the help of architects and

the building vocationalists, we surely cannot but agree that, as trustees of their inheritance, as guardians of the common social possession, the professions have failed lamentably.

But if history means anything, it means that no civilization has a chance to survive except as the forces of knowledge and skill can remain socially victorious over selfish interest; except as all vocations rest upon the basis of that freedom which not only enables, but inspires men to put the honor of their calling above the reach of client, corporation, or government—which means, does it not, above the reach of their own weaknesses.